

FLIGHTLINE

Remembering a Time of Courage

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All this year we celebrate 100 years of extraordinary achievements by the men and women, aircraft, ships, and systems that we collectively call “Naval Aviation.” In this issue of *Naval Aviation News*, we bring particular attention to a very important portion of the past century: the crucial middle period that witnessed the blossoming of Naval Aviation through the development of carriers and their embarked air wings. It is a time that continues to evoke powerful emotions—whether it is when watching the recent television drama *The Pacific*, or when honoring the heroes of the Battle of Midway as the Navy has officially and formally

done every 4 June since 1999. But what lessons does this era offer us in our time? Why is it still important to reflect on the meaning of events such as Midway, or the other great battles of World War II?

We no longer face fleets of aircraft carriers as we did in 1942. Weapons, aircraft, and sensor capabilities have improved considerably since then, expanding the possibilities of where, when, and how battles occur. And if the Battle of Midway were fought today, land-based assets from Hawaii or the West Coast would likely be more successful at contributing to maritime defense than the Army, Marine, and Navy aircraft based at Midway were then. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a modern battle that would exactly resemble the naval engagement that took place in the waters of the North Pacific from 3 to 6 June 1942. It is, however, in the relationship between the ideas of *chance* and *preparation*—two concepts that had such a vital bearing on the outcome of the battle—that we find wisdom for those who must make decisions in today’s vastly changed world.



The Battle of Midway is often characterized as a triumph of American good luck (or, alternatively, as the result of poor luck on the part of the Japanese). What would have happened, for instance, if Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's combat air patrol had been at a higher elevation when Lt. Cmdr. Wade McCluskey's dive bombers arrived over the Japanese Carrier Striking Force? What if the Japanese aircraft had not been in the midst of rearming when the first bombs began to fall on their carriers' flight decks?

"No other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance" as war, wrote the great Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz. War, he believed, "most closely resembles a game of cards." Clausewitz knew that a great commander must develop a keen intellect and show great courage in the face of adversity to succeed in combat. We were indeed blessed in 1942 with leaders such as Rear Admirals Frank Fletcher and Raymond Spruance and Admiral Chester Nimitz who were able to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them that spring—and had the courage to act when the time came to gamble on victory.

But Midway is also a story about the value of preparation. The breaking of the Japanese naval code JN-25 and the strategic benefits that knowledge brought to the battle is certainly

the most famous part of how planning and foresight helped shape victory at Midway even before the battle began. The key lessons learned from Midway were: (1) the value of thorough preparation and communication security in ensuring victory; (2) the importance of force capability and design, allowing our aircraft to accomplish the mission and return home to "Mom" despite having sustained significant damage; and (3) the strength of carriers like USS *Yorktown* (CV 5), which was damaged at the Battle of the Coral Sea, repaired at Pearl Harbor, returned to sea, and contributed significantly at Midway where she took three bombs and four torpedoes before succumbing (and whose aircraft, by the way, sank one of the four Japanese carriers lost during this battle). The brave pilots and aircrewmembers who flew into battle at Midway did so with the benefit of more than 20 years of technological innovation, forethought, and superior training that gave them the platforms and tools they needed to fight and win as well as the knowledge, courage, and discipline to carry on in the face of heavy losses.

As we honor the men and women who have contributed to the success of Naval Aviation over the past century, we should take time to think about how their sacrifices, efforts, and decisions still mean so much to us today. When crises and conflicts arise—as they did in 1941 and as they do today and will in the future—Naval Aviation must fight with skill, determination, imagination, and courage as part of the greatest Navy in the world. And as we did before the Battle of Midway, we must prepare our Navy by cultivating excellence in leadership at every level and building a force ready to confront and respond to our nation's foes wherever, whenever, and however necessary.

A TBD Devastator makes a forlorn torpedo attack on the Japanese Carrier Striking Force at Midway in R.G. Smith's painting "If There Is Only One Man Left."

